Tokyo Green Space

A bevy of local residents and organizations offer surprising visions for creating an urban forest

By Jared Braiterman

Viewed from its tallest towers, Tokyo is an endless expanse of concrete that stretches for hundreds of kilometers. With the exception of a few wonderful large parks—many of them gifts from the imperial family—the city has never benefited from strong central planning or a top-down promotion of green space. The result is a gray urban environment largely cut off from nature.

Yet despite this overabundance of concrete and steel, Tokyo is home to an extraordinary mix of plant visionaries, educators, local governments and ordinary citizens engaged in an effort to make a greener metropolis. They are creating innovative spaces for gardens and wildlife, fostering new connections between residents and the natural world. The best part is, all of us have the opportunity to see some of these exciting developments and to participate in urban greening. Here's a rundown of some of the most notable projects.

Landscape architect Michio Tase

KEIKO MORIYAMA

THE FIREFLIES OF SHINAGAWA

In Japan, fireflies have a mythical cultural resonance. Besides providing the title for a chapter in the 1,000-year-old novel *The Tale of Genji*, they are associated with the folklore of *hitodama*, fiery apparitions of the souls of the recently dead that trick and beguile the living.

While it has become popular to raise fireflies in artificial environments, the summer insects thrive in the uniquely Japanese landscape called *satoyama*, a balance between people and nature created by thousands of years of rice farming. Distinct from wilderness, satoyama are crested in the concentric rings of villages, rice paddies and wild forest.

Professor Makoto Suzuki of the Tokyo University of Agriculture has recently begun a five-year effort to create such a habitat at Ono Gakuen Joshi Middle School in Shinagawa. He began his project by taking schoolchildren to the countryside to see fireflies in their natural environment and to experience how rice paddies were traditionally maintained and cultivated. His goal is to develop living connections between classroom and neighborhood, city and country.

"Even adults can't understand that you can create a firefly habitat in an urban area," Suzuki says. The Shinagawa school has the advantage of being located close to disused wells and waterways—including a stream that has been covered in concrete for decades. With a small grant from the Ministry of Education, Suzuki is working with the schoolchildren, parents, administrators, firefly habitat experts and a specialist from the Tokyo Four Seasons Hotel's renowned firefly garden.

For more information, see www.nodai.ac.jp/english/index.html.

JARED BRAITERMAN

CITIZEN GARDENERS

From Tokyo's humblest alleyways to its most upscale neighborhoods, local residents create gardens in small public spaces outside apartment buildings, shops and homes. Even a crack in the sidewalk can be a place to grow a flower.

These bursts of color and seasonality make walking in Tokyo much more pleasurable than it otherwise might be. Blurring the line between public and private spaces, gardeners create connections among themselves, their neighbors and the wildlife that their plants attract—butterflies, birds, dragonflies and ladybugs.

If you want to practice your Japanese and become a closer part of your community, just engage your local gardeners in the simplest of conversations. Complimenting a particular plant or the overall garden is certain to lead to many other topics. Before you know it, your new friends will interrupt their work to give you an "Okaeri nasai" in the evenings.

Once you've noted what grows well in your area, you might even find yourself tending plants on your balcony, in your hallway, or outside your building.

COURTESY OF 5BAI MIDORI

FIVE-SIDED GREEN

5bai Midori is a landscape company that brings the biodiversity of Japan's countryside to the city via a "modular" native plant system. Its newest project was unveiled on October 1, when the Yamatane Museum, which focuses on post-Meiji Japanese paintings, reopened in a new building clad in native plants (above and right).

The landscape architect behind 5bai Midori, Michio Tase, achieved worldwide fame for ACROS Fukuoka, a 15-story office building built in Kyushu in 1995. On the street side, the structure looks like an ordinary office tower, yet on the side facing a city park, it steeples down under cover of what looks like a lush rural hillside, in effect extending the park vertically and introducing dozens of plant species and a thriving ecosystem for birds and insects.

Like Suzuki's firefly project, 5bai Midori aims to link city and country by revitalizing and extending the satoyama into urban areas—for instance, plants that are used in projects in Tokyo and Osaka are sourced within those regions. Because the system is modular, residential uses range from a single tray with grasses, shrubs and trees to an entire portable garden.

COURTESY OF 5BAI MIDORI

Tase's philosophy is "Passive Architecture and Active Landscaping with Nature." By creating natural habitats that support bees, insects and other animals, his landscapes grow when birds bring additional seeds into the garden.

5bai Midori: 3-33-3 Ebisu, Shibuya-ku. Tel 03-3280-2041. Nearest stn: Ebisu. By appointment only. www.5baimidori.com

Yamatane Museum: 3-12-36 Hiroo, Shibuya-ku. Tel: 03-5777-8600. Open Tue-Sun 10am-5pm, closed Mon. Admission ¥1,000 (adults); student discounts available. Nearest stn: Ebisu. www.yamatane-museum.or.jp/english/index.html

SUGINAMI GREEN CURTAIN

Located just west of Shinjuku, Suginami-ku is an innovator in environmental and garden projects. In addition to initiating one of Tokyo's first residential compost programs, the ward created the world's largest "green curtain" to shade the south wall of its assembly hall in Asagaya-Minami. Loofah, cucumber, gourd, and morning glory extend over 29 meters in height in summer and fall, lowering indoor temperatures by 4 degrees Celsius and cleaning the air outside.

Suginami's giant green curtain has inspired local residents to create their own smaller versions, with bitter melon and morning glory particularly popular as covering vegetation. The ward also gained worldwide attention with Operation Flower, a crime-fighting project that fostered neighborhood interaction by distributing flowers and encouraging gardening. With a ¥6 million annual budget and over 800 residents participating, Operation Flower is credited with reducing the local robbery rate by 80 percent.

JARED BRAITERMAN

Suginami-ku assembly hall: 1-15-1 Asagaya-Minami. Tel: 03-3312-2111. Nearest stn: Minami-Asagaya. Can be viewed from the sidewalk late spring through fall.

ABOUT TOKYO GREEN SPACE

Tokyo Green Space is a public research project exploring new visions of the urban forest. The goal is to educate the general public, corporations and governments about how urban gardens contribute to worldwide development and environment solutions.

A fellowship from Hitachi and the Council on Foreign Relations supports Tokyo Green Space. Its founder, Jared Braiterman, PhD, is a Harvard- and Stanford-trained design anthropologist and a Research Fellow at the Tokyo University of Agriculture.

Ongoing research findings are documented on a free blog. Your comments and input are most welcome.

www.tokyogreenspace.wordpress.com